

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

WATER, PREY, AND GAME BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA. By Alexander Wetmore and other eminent ornithologists. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C., 1965: $7 \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ in., 464 pp., 643 illus. (600 in color), 6 phono. records in back-cover pocket, $6\frac{1}{4}$ in., $33\frac{1}{3}$ rpm, 2 sides. \$11.95.

Whether we have few or many bird books, most of us want in our collection at least one popular work that treats *all* the birds from coast to coast and shows a recognizable picture of each in color. If buying such a work today, we may well choose this volume and its 1964 companion, "Song and Garden Birds of North America" (the two in cloth box for \$25.00). The only approximate alternative is T. Gilbert Pearson's "Birds of America" (presently \$8.95), which is still widely sold in bookstores although it was first published almost 50 years ago and betrays its vintage in both text and illustration.

This new book treats 329 species from the loons through the swifts in the AOU Checklist. (It was obviously a challenge to find a title to embrace such diverse groups, including the cuckoos, goatsuckers, and swifts, which are not by any stretch of the imagination water, prey, or game birds.) The illustrations, the majority of them color photographs and some of them truly spectacular, have been rounded up from many sources. The principal photographers, Frederick Kent Truslow, Arthur A. Allen, Eliot Porter, G. Ronald Austing, and Karl W. Kenyon, and the painters, Walter A. Weber and Allan Brooks, are men of established reputations, but many photographs were gathered also from comparatively unknown people. The fact that the paintings by Brooks were used earlier, with different arrangements and plates, in the National Geographic Society's long-out-of-print "Book of Birds" (2 vols., 1932 to 1939), does not detract from their value here, in my opinion.

The printing, the paper, and the binding are excellent. No effort was spared to produce a book that will be an attractive item on your library shelf for many years. If the two volumes had been bound as one, the resulting book would have been too heavy for convenient handling.

Next after the pictures among the attractions of this book, I believe, are the phonograph records by Peter Paul Kellogg of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. These are six small vinyl disks (12 sides) presenting the voices of 97 species of birds. The sound quality is excellent. The records are played by placing on the turntable the entire booklet opened to the desired page. By ingenious use of the transparency of the disks, the needle can be placed directly at the song wanted, without playing the whole record to find it. Each side, presenting about eight voices, plays a little over 5 minutes. The system works well except that, if the tone arm is not positioned accurately at the start, it may slide off the disk and cause the square corners of the booklet to hit the stylus alarmingly.

Each chapter in the book, with a few exceptions, is devoted to one family of birds. There is a general account of the family, often by a recognized authority, and then some comments about each species. The signed accounts are mostly short, narrative, and personal. The statements about the species are necessarily brief, ranging from less than 100 to more than 700 words (typically 200 to 300), concluding with a short paragraph on the range and "characteristics" (field marks). Three chapters scattered through the book are of a different kind, treating broadly the history of birds, migration, and conservation. The opening chapter by Wetmore on the development of birds through the ages is of particular interest. Other authors writing in the fields of their special competence are John W. Aldrich, Robert Porter Allen, Dean Amadon, Frank C. Craighead, Jr.,

John J. Craighead, Philip S. Humphrey, George H. Lowery, Jr., Robert M. McClung, Alden H. Miller, Robert Cushman Murphy, Robert J. Newman, Roger Tory Peterson, Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., Austin L. Rand, S. Dillon Ripley, Alexander Sprunt, Jr., George Miksch Sutton, Frederick Kent Truslow, and Paul A. Zahl.

In regarding this work primarily as a "picture book," perhaps inevitably I place the text in a secondary position among its attractions. Could any words compete with such bright colors? Should we expect the text to be more than a mere appendage to the illustrations? Yet I believe the "National Geographic formula" tends further to downgrade the word content in the eyes of ornithologists.

Although the stated authors of portions are prestigious, the reader senses a pattern of treatment (chatty, anecdotal, and sometimes inconsequential) that bespeaks an anonymous staff writer (or perhaps an army of them) that does not know birds but uses a practiced method for popularizing subjects of all kinds. Even in the signed portions, one suspects that the distinguished authors served more importantly to assure factual accuracy than to determine the content and style. The dominant role of anonymous staff authors is suggested further by the circumstance that the writers are not identified in 23 of the 50 chapters and all of the species accounts.

The account of the Common Goldeneye, for example, begins, "A March snowstorm drops a blanket of white across a New England estuary. Ice cakes litter the surface, but the bleak setting fails to dampen the fervid courting by goldeneye drakes." The point of this leisurely flight of rhetoric, I think, is that goldeneyes court in early spring. I would not object to it in a lengthy treatment of the species or in a nature-is-beautiful essay. But I wonder what was in the author's mind who devoted a tenth of the species account to a fact that is unremarkable and in no sense unique to the goldeneye. Presumably he believes that his imagery is more interesting than anything informative that could be said about the bird. The person searching this book for information will find such passages frothy.

Again, the matter of authorship will not worry the majority of the 300,000 buyers of the first printing of this book, but it will perplex ornithologists. When one opens the book, he is likely to assume at first glance that the distinguished Alexander Wetmore is the principal author, and I suspect that bibliographers and librarians will so list it. Yet, a turn of the page raises a question about how much this means. Two of 50 chapters were signed by Wetmore (one of these an edited version of a chapter on owls he wrote in the thirties for the "Book of Birds"); and therefore, presumably, the unsigned portions were not his work. Next we notice that his name does not appear on the spine of the book. Thus alerted (and puzzled), we eye other parts more critically. Immediately our attention is arrested at the table of contents by a mislabeled owl that Wetmore, not even in an inattentive moment, would have called a Great Horned Owl. A few other pictures cause us to wrinkle our brows. The long-dead mammal in the talons of the Golden Eagle (p. 27) takes some of the drama from what otherwise might have been a view of this magnificent bird at the moment of kill. The frayed tail of the Swainson's Hawk (p. 230) suggests a caged bird, and the eyes of the Spotted Owl (p. 443) are not those of a bird in health. The Golden Plover (p. 323) seems to be the European species, *Pluvialis apricaria*.

The vague handling of authorship leads to some other minor annoyances. The table of contents lists the subjects of chapters but not the authors, whose names are among the book's genuine attractions in many instances. "The author" in a picture caption on page 36 means Wetmore and on page 211 seems to mean Miller.

In spite of my criticisms, I want to emphasize that this book is attractive and, except

for a few slips, accurate. These are strong virtues. The book deserves a wide popular audience, and I hope this audience will not be severely reduced because the volume is obtainable only from the publisher and not through bookstores. The issuance of a work of this scope is a major event in ornithology, for it is books like this that foster the interest from which scientists grow.—HAROLD MAYFIELD.

TOP FLIGHT: SPEED INDEX TO WATERFOWL OF NORTH AMERICA. By John A. Ruthven and William Zimmerman. Moebius Printing Company, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1965: $4\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{1}{4}$ in., 112 pp., 260 col. illus. \$6.95.

"Top Flight" is an interesting new approach to a sort of "Slim Jim" (dimensions, $4\frac{1}{2}$ by $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches), pocket-adapted field guide. Its slender format with plastic-coated board binding adapts it rather well to deep hunting coat pockets. The illustrating of molting birds as encountered by the hunters in fall as well as the spring nesting plumages is an excellent idea. The simplified classification of the waterfowl by marginal color bars on the pages, as ready reference to the colors of the birds, suggests that here is a simple and easy solution to a difficult identification problem. However, I do not feel that the problems of waterfowl recognition can be pigeonholed in quite such an easy fashion. The colors, especially of females and various molting plumages of male ducks, are too near the border line of gray and brown to be readily called one or the other. I feel this simplified keying of color will break down completely when one attempts to use such criteria for grouping unknown birds.

In my field experiences I have found that many species identifications depend on differentiating very faint and indistinct characters. After one becomes thoroughly acquainted with the degree of variation in both color and form that exists in certain characters, and not until then, can one be reasonably sure of whether a duck's neck is longer and more slender or shorter and thicker than another. To the uninitiated, these descriptive terms mean little until he knows within what limits these descriptions apply. Because of this necessity for making fine distinctions, it follows that these fine distinctions must appear in any illustrations that are to be of value in pointing them out. For instance, the winter plumages of the Horned and Eared Grebes are actually so similar as to be difficult to distinguish, yet the gray-and-white Horned Grebe on page 30 is vastly different from the brown Eared Grebe on page 32, at least in the copy of the book I examined. Likewise, the Gadwalls swimming, page 96, are far darker birds than the same birds in flight, page 97, and the gray Black Brant, page 64, differs markedly from the brown bird in flight, page 65. These errors may well be not the artists' fault but the color reproducer's. Other color errors appear, such as the Pintail and merganser heads, pages 82 and 83, are far too reddish.

The proportions of several figures seem incorrect. The artists did not make careful enough measurements of the heads and bills as compared with the tails, the feet, or the wings in several plates. The Ruddy's head on page 62, for instance, is too large, while among others the head of the flying Green-winged Teal on page 25 and that of the swan on page 107 are too small. The necks of the swan and goose in the silhouettes on page 9 would be found to be longer if photographs were carefully measured. Furthermore, the attitude of the merganser does not show the tendency for the bill to be carried above the horizontal. The loon in flight, page 9, also lacks the upcurved neck characteristic of that species while the swimming loon's bill, page 64, is far too thin.

The highly abbreviated text contains many relatively meaningless words. On page 83, "a flock of Pintails, with their pointed wings and tails and their long, forward-poised,